



## BEN TURPIN:

### *The Rear Guard of Saxicolous Wayfarers of Cinematic Finitude*

By Odacer "Reggie" Sinclair, Baronet

#### *Preface*

There are those, such as pontificating and self-serving propagandist Robert Delford Brown, who would like to see Ben Turpin through the rosy glasses of religiosity; in point of fact having the unseemly and asinine temerity to canonize him. Hard to credit, I know. But that's what they actually propound. That Ben himself would distance himself from the sanctimonious characterization, such as Mr. Brown suggests, few will doubt; since, for one thing, it is probably safe to assume that Ben outgrew church at an early age. Indeed, in later years he spoke up in decrying the influence of religion in only discouraging attendance at Sunday movie matinees. Moreover, there is the well-vouched tradition that when the *little woman* took it into her head to have the local parson over for supper, Ben, without hedging or further ado, climbed out a back-window to join the waiting car of a pal; by which mean, the two sought refuge at the card room or (according to one version) the pool hall.

As best as one might surmise, Mr. Brown is evidently one of those aery-headed persons who believes in "Art for Art's sake;" when for those who knew Ben it was always and clearly "Ben for Ben's sake." Yet perhaps even worse, the misrepresentations of this pompous and affected charlatan are a clear and telling example and further proof, if ever such was needed, of how authentic history can be mangled and distorted beyond recognition in order to serve dubious motives. It is in no small part to combat this problem then that, with the utmost attention to both plausible and likely fact, we unfold to you the true story.



*A personally inscribed photograph I  
received from Ben himself on his death bed.*

### *“c/o Ben Turpin, Genius”: A Tribute*

Worthy and talented movie actors have indeed proven numerous since Hollywood’s earliest days. Yet when it comes those who actually attained the finish line of consummate merit, whoever matched or bettered the motion picture grandeur or thespian virtuosity of Ben Turpin? Here was a player who could take on the biggest roles the screen ever furnished: Desert chieftain, Teutonic noble, Frontier lawman, or venerated champion of hearth and home. Nor can any film historian who would flatter themselves on knowing the *true* story can afford to ignore or slight the countless houses brought down by torrents and oceans of tears so tenderly lifted from audiences’ eyes. In those days, as the saying goes, movies were movies. But with Ben there was always something even above and beyond. More than four, more than five, here were eight star performances the like few others have ever realized or known. Perhaps now then and at last, the time has come to address and inquire into the matter of “The Unknown Turpin.” For who made a more imposing figure in the saddle, rescued gals in peril, or brought justice to a troubled land better than old Ben? Who fought that hard grueling fight, climbed the highest mountain, braved the stormiest household? Who outfoxed crafty outlaws, man-handled toughs, wrestled wild bears, made all the women swoon better than Ben? Who saw past the deceiver’s bluff and vanquished the deluded cheat in his own execrable snare? And who well but he, when the light shone through in that fleeting moment of epiphany, would have the daring do to admit, when all else were hushed and silent, that the window might need fixing? Regarding these questions then -- and certainly to anyone whose done the requisite time in the movie house expected of an expert -- there can be little or no mystery.

He played with all the best and later in his career had his pick of parts. Surrounded by Bathing Beauties and strumming the trusty uke, here was a ready model for manly youth. Here was a performer who played his heart out with every paycheck -- nor did he ever let the fans down. The films? They read like indelible and chiseled inscriptions on Cinema’s most granite monument. “Yukon Jake,” “A Small Town Idol,” “The Eyes Have It,” “Pride of Pikeville,” “The Shriek of Araby,” are just a few of the many inspired and illuminating milestones one might enumerate. Oh, pie-throwing you

say? Ben could hold his own with the very best -- face to the front. Indeed were truth admitted, many today could still learn a thing or two from this titan of celluloid who never flinched whenever the flung pastry of psychosocio-respectability traversed the numbing eternity of physical and ontological space. The mordant insight effused through his character portrayals perhaps most epitomized the neo-existential inanition of rural/industrial man. At the same time, let it not be overlooked, his photo-chronographic incunabulum is visual testimony to twentieth century ocular syncretism. Not that Ben, were he alive to day, would agree or even understand what all this means. Nevertheless, the intelligent character of such way of speaking certainly no properly sophisticated reader will think to dispute.

Mack Sennett would later recall: "Ben Turpin died rich and having fun. After his retirement it was his hobby to direct traffic at the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Western Avenue. With eyes crossed and arms flailing he engineered some of the most outrageous automotive jams in the history of congested Los Angeles. "He yelled to every motorist, 'Ben Turpin, three thousand dollars a week!'"

Sifting through the remnants of the now hallowed record, it's easy to see why he drew this kind of figure, and why his place is ever set in the highest attic of the pantheon of screen immortals. Yet is his birthday set aside as a contemplative day off from work? His statue standing somewhere along the gilded walks of Hollywood Boulevard? His bust conspicuously adorning the haven of a city park?

No, but Ben Turpin is here nonetheless; here in spirit and here in mind. And that incomparable and unparalleled vision, that once led forth theater goers of a bygone age onto the daunting horizon of tomorrow *lives*, and will undoubtedly continue to, for generations to come.

# “A Trip Down Memory Lane...”

~ *THE (true) BEN TURPIN STORY* ~

In his earliest youth, Ben was born in the year 1869 in the town of New Orleans, Louisiana. His father was a successful candy merchant, who owned two stores. Not surprisingly, it was his wish that Ben, the second of his three children, would one day follow in his footsteps.

“Not on your life!” was the characteristic reaction.

But, here, why not let Ben tell the story as he gave it in early interviews:

*“I decided against the candy business because I was fed up on it and liked beer and cheese at the corner bar a lot better.*

*“I kept on being the life of the neighborhood until I was seventeen, and then the old man called me in the parlor one night, looked me in the eye and said, ‘Kid, you’re getting pretty tough. Look, Ben, you ought to get away from here. Go out and see something of the world. Go West. There’s lots of chances there. Go to Chicago. Go anywhere!’*

*“I intended to sell my business here,” he explained ‘and move back to New Orleans. I’ve laid aside a hundred dollars for you. Here it is; take it and get out!’*

*“‘That sounds all right,’ I told him; ‘but what am I going to do when the hundred’s gone?’*

*“‘I’ll tell you,’” he answered. ‘You get a job. Earn your own living, and don’t come back expecting any more money from me, because there won’t be anymore!’*

*“‘Now here’s a hundred bucks for yourself; go out into the world and amount to something.’ I took the hundred bucks and we shook hands. A hundred bucks was a lot of dough in those days - 1885.”*

Ben ended up somewhere in the East, possibly in Jersey City as best he could recollect, and lost the hundred in a crap game.

*“Then I was in a fix! I was only a few miles from New York, but I didn’t dare go back home.*

*“I had never ridden a freight train up to that time - didn’t know how, or anything about it. But I saw a train in the yards and climbed on, and the next thing I knew I landed in Chicago!”*

On wondering how to get something to eat, someone among a group of individuals he met told him to “Hit the backdoors!” To Ben this made a lot of sense, particularly since at the time, he “didn’t feel any wish to go and hunt a job...”

*“I decided that inasmuch as I was a young man, I’d see the country before settling down. So I became a hobo, and a good one. I’ve been kicked off of more freight trains between Atlantic and Pacific seaboard than any other five-year man in the business...”*

*“When I fell off that rattler I decided that now was the time to go to work, so I mosied up town (Pittsburg) and looked around until I saw a sign in front of a restaurant that said, ‘Dishwasher Wanted.’ I went in and knocked that job off for myself, and what a dishwasher I was.*

*“I worked hard and was promoted to hash slinger....”*

It was not long afterward that Ben got the itch for acting. And it was just a matter of time before he joined a medicine show. One thing led to another and within a couple years he landed himself a high paying job in pictures.



Here’s Ben in one of his usual roles as the Western “Lawman.” That’s Marie Prevost doing the honors.



Rudolph Valentino got a run for his money when Ben appeared as the *Shriek of Araby*. While it would be saying too much to claim that Ben outdid the famous latin Romeo, nevertheless there were those who thought the latter had finally met his match.



One perhaps not so familiar fact is that Ben was a great influence on the renowned German-born film director and actor Erich von Stroheim, as the above picture clearly demonstrates. Albert Einstein himself, as is already well known, was someone not above taking up the Turpin “look.”



And there was time for fun, as well. Here's Ben horsing it up with some Bathing Beauties ~ convincing proof that he could do comedy as well as drama.





Since we will want to give the unvarnished truth, it is only part of the record to acknowledge Ben's regrettable association with the womanizing "Lover Boy" Lester Lorrain. The escapades of the pair drew deserved opprobrium, and only came to an end when Lorrain, caught in the act with another man's wife, was chased out of town by an angry lynch mob. Fortunately, Ben's own reputation remained un-besmirched by the incident.



Always generous and unsparing of his time when it came to young people, here Ben shows an unidentified newcomer "how it's done." Some viewers will recognize in the outfit Ben is wearing a style adopted many years later by a number of prominent rap artists.



Shown shortly after receiving a knighthood from the one-time King of England George V (or some other such personage of note.) The grateful metropolis of London even went so far as to name their famous clock after the Hollywood hero. It was on that same occasion that in reaction to a group of people protesting public apathy that Ben gave his celebrated retort, "Who cares?" ~ much to the delight of onlookers.



Man of the Hour.





Ben reminiscing with his documentary biographer, Snead Hunn.

~ \* \* ~

The End?

*For now yes, but in future look forward to more Ben Turpin photos and memories.*



(Wait a minute. Before I forget.)



Surf's up! (And that's decades before anyone had ever heard of Frankie Avalon.)



Taking risks few actors of his popularity and box-office standing would hardly dare even contemplate, here's Ben defying all the nay-sayers and producing his own film adaptation, in which he starred, of Ibsen's "A Doll's House."



"To sleep...per chance to dream."



The private Turpin. Ben off camera, and as only his nearest friends and associates had the opportunity to know him.

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